

ISRAEL OR EGYPT? LIFE OR DEATH?

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In 586 B.C., Nechadnezzar King of Babylon broke down the walls of Jerusalem and destroyed the city, including the Lord's temple, and carried away the remnant of the people captive (Jer 39:1-9). He left only a few people in the land of Israel: "But Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard left of the poor of the people, which had nothing, in the land of Judah, and gave them vineyards and fields at the same time" (Jer 39:10). Jeremiah the prophet was released from prison by the Babylonians and he remained among the few people left behind (Jer 39:11-18). Jeremiah then went to Gedaliah the son of Ahikam in Mizpeh, as Gedaliah had been made governor of the cities of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar (Jer 40:1-6). A man named Ishmael the son of Nethaniah then killed Gedaliah in Mizpeh, along with the Jews and the Chaldeans who were with him there (Jer 41:1-3). Johanan the son of Kareah rescued the Jews who remained with Ishmael (Jer 41:13-16). These few surviving Jews of Jerusalem then "departed, and dwelt in the habitation of Chimham, which is by Bethlehem, to go to enter into Egypt, because of the Chaldeans: for they were afraid of them, because Ishmael the son of Nethaniah had slain Gedaliah the son of Ahikam, whom the king of Babylon made governor in the land" (Jer 41:17-18). They wanted to go down to Egypt for safety, but was this the right thing for them to do?

Saying the right words

The remnant of the people wanted to go into Egypt and asked Jeremiah to find out from God where they should go. The people correctly (though insincerely) acknowledged that man should not take a step on his own. Jeremiah 10:23 says, "*O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps.*" Man does not determine what is right and wrong for himself or decide what is good and evil. Only God does that, and only in His holy word (Psa 119:105; Matt 4:4; 19:17-18; Luke 4:4; 18:19). Only the word of the Lord our God "*may show us the way wherein we may walk, and the thing that we may do*" (Jer 42:3). These Israelites had at least learned the right words.

Then the remnant of Judah said to Jeremiah, "*The Lord be a true and faithful witness between us, if we do not even according to all things for the which the Lord thy God shall send thee to us. Whether it be good, or whether it be evil, we will obey the voice of the Lord our God, to whom we send thee; that it may be well with us, when we obey the voice of the Lord our God*" (Jer 42:5-6). These people made an oath to obey whatever God said. But they did not keep it.

A choice between life and death

The remnant of Judah had two possible courses of action to choose between. They could either remain in the land of Israel or go to Egypt. God said, "*If ye will still abide in this land, then will I build you, and not pull you down, and I will plant you, and not pluck you up: for I repent me of the evil that I have done unto you. Be not afraid of the king of Babylon, of whom ye are afraid; be not afraid of him, saith the Lord: for I am with you to save you, and to deliver you from his hand. And I will show mercies unto you, that he may have mercy upon you, and cause you to return to your own land*" (Jer 42:10-12). God *promised* to protect these people if they remained in the land of Israel.

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He then warned them of the consequences of choosing to go down to Egypt: “But if ye say, We will not dwell in this land, neither obey the voice of the Lord your God, saying, No; but we will go into the land of Egypt, where we shall see no war, nor hear the sound of the trumpet, nor have hunger of bread; and there will we dwell: and now therefore hear the word of the Lord, ye remnant of Judah; Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; *If ye wholly set your faces to enter into Egypt, and go to sojourn there; then it shall come to pass, that the sword, which ye feared, shall overtake you there in the land of Egypt, and the famine, whereof ye were afraid, shall follow close after you there in Egypt; and there ye shall die.* So shall it be with all the men that set their faces to go into Egypt to sojourn there; they shall die by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence: and none of them shall remain or escape from the evil that I will bring upon them. For thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; As mine anger and my fury hath been poured forth upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem; so shall my fury be poured forth upon you, when ye shall enter into Egypt: and ye shall be an execration, and an astonishment, and a curse, and a reproach; and ye shall see this place no more. The Lord hath said concerning you, O ye remnant of Judah; Go ye not into Egypt: know certainly that I have admonished you this day” (Jer 42:13-19). There were only two options: stay and Israel and live, or go to Egypt and die.

Words without deeds

God admonished the remnant of Judah for their insincere request to know His will concerning whether or not they should go to Egypt, and for their insincere promise to obey whatever God told them. God said, “*For ye dissembled in your hearts, when ye sent me unto the Lord your God, saying, Pray for us unto the Lord our God; and according unto all that the Lord our God shall say, so declare unto us, and we will do it. And now I have this day declared it to you; but ye have not obeyed the voice of the Lord your God, nor any thing for the which he hath sent me unto you. Now therefore know certainly that ye shall die by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence, in the place whither ye desire to go and to sojourn*” (Jer 42:20-22). The people then rejected what Jeremiah said, and claimed it was not God’s word (Jer 43:1-3). They all went to Egypt, and there they died (Jer 43:4-44:30). These people were like the second son in Christ’s parable, who said, “I go, sir: and went not” (Matt 21:30). They were like the ones whom Christ said, “*This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoreth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me*” (Matt 15:8). Our Lord also asked in Luke 6:46, “And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” “*Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven*” (Matt 7:21). For us, there are also two roads to choose from: “Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (Matt 7:13-14). We too must either choose the Lord’s way to have eternal life, or go another way and die.